With reference to textual integrity, explore how time and place are used in Eliot’s poetry to shape the reader’s understanding of man’s isolation.

In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO of the poems set for study.

T.S. Eliot’s free form poetry not only challenges the ideas and values of his society but also traditional literary conventions. His Modernist poems Rhapsody on a Windy Night (Rhapsody) and The Journey of the Magi (JM), both chart journeys through motifs of time and place to explore man’s isolation. Chronological progression and setting within Eliot’s poems are also used to create a sense of textual integrity and contribute to their overall significance.

Rhapsody (1915) utilizes a linear progression of time and a singular setting to chart an individual’s isolation from society. This idea is examined through the disconnection between individual and societal beliefs, as established by the parallels drawn between the narrator’s stream of consciousness and the personified street lamp’s dialogue. This is evident in the continuing plethora of olfactory imagery in the sixth stanza – “female smells”, “cocktail smells” – and the anachronistic imagery of the penultimate stanza, for instance “the toothbrush hangs on the wall” – an observation the lamp would not be able to make. Lexical choice in dialogue such as “regard” and “remark” is used to suggest an inability to interact, despite the ability to observe. This sense of alienation is furthered through the verb choice “sputtered”, “muttered” and “hummed” reflecting a lack of clarity in communication. By using the lamp as a metaphorical symbol of the narrator’s psyche, Eliot explores the individual’s sense of disconnection and subsequent isolation.

Disconnection is accentuated by allusions to the tension within society, for instance in the metaphor of “a broken spring... ready to snap”. Markings of time – “twelve o’clock”, “half-past two” – at the beginnings of stanzas, are used to create suspense, indicating the narrator’s tension. The time motif is altered slightly towards the end of the poem where “four o’clock” is included in dialogue, demonstrating an acknowledgement of the
progression of time. The extended metaphor of ‘twisting’, introduced by the violent imagery of “a crowd of twisted things”, representing the pressure and manipulation placed upon the narrator to conform to accepted values and ideas of the contextual time period. The final line of the poem “the last twist of the knife” continues this ‘twisted’ imagery, and creates a final nightmarish depiction where death is favored over life. Coupled with the dark urban setting this violent imagery explores isolation to create an eerie portrayal of a perishing society. Eliot’s portrayal of this perishing society through the motifs of time and place are used to shape the reader’s understanding of man’s isolation.

Eliot’s 1927 poem, The Journey of the Magi, draws parallels between physical and spiritual journey by using an anachronistic timeline to chart the travels of a wise man on his search for new faith. Written during Eliot’s conversion from Unitarianism to Anglican Christianity, the poem uses strong biblical allusions – such as “an old white horse”, symbolic of the apocalypse in the book of revelations – to reinforce the uncertainty of Eliot’s own spiritual journey. Lacking the abrasive tone which is characteristic of his other poetry, JM shows a main focus on this spiritual doubt, as well as a secondary focus on urban decay. This is suggested through the juxtaposition of characterization, in the lines “the silken girls bringing sherbet/then the camel men cursing and grumbling”. Urbanization is also implied through the use of double entendre in negative imagery, as seen in the phrase “and the night fires going out, and the lack of shelters”. This same segment of the first stanza uses polysyndeton to accentuate the physical hardships faced and further emphasize the theme of doubt. Alliteration of the ‘w’ sound in the intertextual inclusion of “ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter”, at the start of the poem is also used to establish an atmosphere of pessimism.

While the progression of time is depicted in a differing manner to Rhapsody, similar ideas of disconnection are suggested through the juxtaposition of traditional and ‘new’ societal values and beliefs. This is analyzed in the last stanza where capitalization of certain repetitions of “birth and death” are used to symbolize the metaphorical “Death” and “Birth” of traditions. The motifs of time and place as seen in the line “arriving at evening” also show these contrasting ideas through lexical choice, where “arriving” suggests a beginning and “evening” suggests an end. Metaphors in this final stanza, for instance “an alien people
clutching their gods”, reflect the isolation of an individual both within spirituality and in society. The understatement “(you might say) satisfactory”, referring to the birth of Christ, uses anachronism to further highlight the narrator’s isolation. This displacement of time and place allows for the simultaneous portrayal of an unsatisfactory journey for the wise man and a satisfactory outcome for the future of the Christian religion as a whole. While seeming paradoxical, through the use of anachronism, the dual ideas of “satisfactory” are in fact representative of textual integrity. The ending of JME in a similar manner to Rhapsody, where the line “I should be glad of another death” indicates a preference for the certainty of death, uses the outcomes of the journey to shape the reader’s understanding of man’s isolation.

Through use of the motifs of time and place in the poems Rhapsody on a Windy Night and The Journey of the Magi, as examined above, T.S. Eliot’s Modernist poetry challenges the ideas and values of his contextual time period. His portrayals of disconnection as a result of doubt in faith and urban decay help to shape the reader’s understanding of man’s isolation.